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FM AMEMBASSY BAKU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5140
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 2762
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 0903
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 000353

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/10/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: CANDIDATES BEGIN JOCKEYING FOR PRESIDENTIAL RACE,
WHILE AZADLIQ BLOC THREATENS BOYCOTT

REF: A. 2007 BAKU 1488
[1](#)B. 2007 BAKU 298

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ANNE E. DERSE PER 1.4(B,D).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Six months out from Azerbaijan's October presidential election, four contenders have thrown their hats in the ring to run against incumbent President Ilham Aliyev, who seeks a second -- and per the Azerbaijani Constitution, final -- term in office. The presidential hopefuls include Azerbaijan Public Forum Leader Eldar Namazov, opposition Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar, opposition Azerbaijan Democratic Party Chair Sardar Jalaloglu, and pseudo-opposition Hope Party Chair Igbal Agazade. Opposition Azadliq bloc has indicated it likely will boycott the election, with an official announcement expected in April or May. The Azadliq bloc's probable boycott of the election has eliminated any chance of a united opposition candidate or any serious challenge to Aliyev, and threatens to drive the bloc into further irrelevancy. END SUMMARY

THE RULING PARTY

[1](#)2. (C) According to Yeni Azerbaijan Party (YAP) Executive Secretary and de facto Chair Ali Ahmadov, the ruling party's

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senior leadership agrees that President Aliyev should be the party's candidate; for this reason, there is "no need for a formal selection process." That said, as the official campaign period approaches, Ahmadov expects that YAP will hold a congress to officially nominate Aliyev as the party's candidate for president. Ahmadov condemned the opposition Azadliq bloc's threatened boycott of the presidential election as "undemocratic," noting that the opposition did not want to participate because it did not have a chance of winning. But, he said, opposition members "don't listen; they will vote anyway." The opposition was weakening for a number of reasons, he said, and it had not been able to unite around a single candidate in years. Ahmadov later made a statement to the press that YAP anticipated Aliyev would win with 80 percent of the vote.

THE NON-TRADITIONAL OPPOSITION CANDIDATE

[1](#)3. (C) Azerbaijan Public Forum leader Eldar Namazov, the first to publicly announce his intention to run for president, seems to have a more detailed campaign plan than any of the other potential candidates (ref a). In November 2007, Namazov unveiled his "Citizen's Charter in the Name of

National Solidarity and Democratic Revival," which is the basis of his campaign. Namazov intends his charter to be a means of transitioning Azerbaijan's government from "authoritarian" to democratic rule. He plans to continue traveling through Azerbaijan's regions to collect signatures on the charter, with a goal of obtaining 100,000. Namazov also plans to conduct a series of "gatherings" throughout the country, focusing on the needs of the local populations. While Namazov does not yet have the backing of any specific political parties, he has many high-profile supporters, mainly from Baku's pro-opposition intelligentsia. Press reports speculated that Rasul Guliyev's Open Society Party would back Namazov's candidacy; while Namazov told us that he plans to visit Guliyev during an upcoming visit to the U.S., neither the Open Society Party nor Namazov have confirmed any arrangement. Before officially announcing his intent to run, Namazov had repeatedly called for an opposition primary to identify a single candidate.

¶4. (C) Namazov's plan to run, specifically his proposal to hold an opposition primary, has drawn a sharp reaction from the traditional opposition. Popular Front Party (PFP) Chair Ali Kerimli was disdainful of Namazov's proposal to hold primaries for a unified opposition candidate. Saying that Namazov is "smart but not charismatic," Kerimli derided Namazov's plans as empty posturing to try to appear to the GOAJ and the West as a new, "constructive" opposition figure.

Kerimli argued that Namazov knows full well the GOAJ prevents the major opposition parties from holding meetings in the regions; under these circumstances, how could they organize a massive grassroots effort to elect a unified candidate? Kerimli alleged that Namazov sought only to advance his own personal goals -- perhaps in hopes of gaining a parliamentary seat in 2010 -- by currying favor with the GOAJ and positioning himself as a "constructive" opposition presidential candidate.

¶5. (C) Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar blasted Eldar Namazov for telling the press that "none of the major opposition parties" supported his primary proposal, when Namazov, according to Gambar, failed to consult Musavat. He said that, in principle, Musavat supported the idea of party primaries to select candidates, adding that Musavat was the first party in Azerbaijan to make this proposal in 2001 and had conducted primaries in 2004. Gambar dismissed Namazov's plans to identify a single opposition candidate as "fiction."

Given that the other "opposition" parties are "instruments of (Presidential Chief of Staff) Ramiz Mehdiyev, Russia and Iran," what type of single opposition candidate could possibly exist, Gambar asked.

THE DISJOINTED OPPOSITION

¶6. (C) The opposition Azadliq bloc, made up of the PFP, the Azerbaijan Liberal Party (ALP), and the Citizens' Development Party, and headed by PFP's Ali Kerimli, seems determined to boycott the presidential election. More than a year before the election, Kerimli outlined to us four conditions which would have to be met in order for the Azadliq bloc to participate in the election: fair opposition representation on election commissions; equitable television access for opposition candidates; fully restored freedom of assembly; and release of all political prisoners in Azerbaijan.

¶7. (C) In January, telling us that these conditions had not been met and the overall circumstances had not changed, Kerimli said the bloc does not want to be part of the "democratic show" that the GOAJ will put on in October. The Azadliq bloc seems to be banking on the belief that its boycott will prompt the international community to condemn the election as fundamentally flawed. "The election won't be called a democratic process if we don't participate," Kerimli predicted. He added that Azadliq's position was predicated on "moral values" and that a boycott is necessary to retain credibility in the eyes of its core constituency. He argued that ordinary citizens are looking for an alternative to the

GOAJ to express their dissent and that "they will forget about us if we join the 'show' opposition" that will participate in the October presidential election. Adding that he saw nothing that indicated the GOAJ would take significant steps to improve the political climate, he chastised the U.S. for not exerting greater pressure on the GOAJ. Kerimli said Azadliq bloc would make a firm decision on whether to participate in the election in April or May. If the bloc participates, he said either he or ALP leader Lala Shovket would be Azadliq's candidate.

18. (C) Lala Shovket separately confirmed Azadliq bloc's position, stressing that Azadliq will not participate in "show elections with pre-determined results." The opposition's participation in the election would serve only to strengthen the Aliyev regime by adding credibility to the system, Shovket argued. Making it clear that she already has taken the decision to boycott the election, Shovket said she did not take the decision lightly and spent considerable time weighing the pros and cons of a boycott. The positives of participating in the election could be enormous, Shovket said, explaining that the campaign would give opposition parties the ability to appear on television, travel in the regions, and debate issues with representatives of the ruling party, things they have not been able to do for "almost two years," according to Shovket. Yet these significant gains are far outweighed by the negatives, Shovket said, as the Azadliq bloc's participation in the election would raise the public's expectations when "no change is possible." A boycott, Shovket said, is necessary to retain the bloc's leadership and popular credibility. Shovket heatedly accused Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar of "playing games" by first telling Azadliq that it would join the boycott and then two days later denying this to the press. Shovket asserted that if Musavat were to join the boycott, there is "no way" the international community could label the presidential election free and fair.

SOME OPPOSITION PARTIES WILL PARTICIPATE

19. (C) In meetings over the past year, Isa Gambar steadily has maintained that the Musavat Party will participate in the October presidential election. Gambar said the Musavat Party leadership decided that "no objectives can be gained from a

boycott." Gambar believes that Azadliq bloc's calls for a boycott serves only to "make the population passive" and argued that opposition participation in the election would not only prompt party members to renew their grassroots democratic activity but also could help ease government pressure on the opposition as the election will force the GOAJ to give the opposition television airtime and allow them to hold rallies and meetings. Gambar said an opposition boycott could be effective only if it prompts the GOAJ, the Azerbaijani people or the international community not to recognize the election's results, a possibility he recognized was "unrealistic." According to Gambar, Musavat will use the October presidential election as an opportunity to push for democratization and greater political space. Musavat would prefer a united opposition candidate, Gambar said, but he noted that the real issue is not whether the opposition unites to field a single candidate; rather, it is whether the GOAJ will create the conditions necessary for a free and fair election.

10. (C) Opposition Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADP) Chair Sardar Jalaloglu has publicly announced his intention to run for president. According to Jalaloglu, the ADP would prefer to support the candidacy of a single opposition candidate, but he said that the Azadliq bloc's likely boycott of the election had made that impossible. Emphasizing that the ADP had become a "constructive opposition" party, Jalaloglu explained that the opposition's past attempts to boycott had not made a difference in election results. "We have to use all possible opportunities to get our message out to the public," he said. Jalaloglu noted the need for "serious constitutional changes," particularly the return to a

proportional electoral system, a stronger role for Parliament, and balanced election commissions. He said he wanted to propose "a real alternative to the government," and was working on establishing a "shadow cabinet," including representatives of a formation of opposition parties, in the event that he is elected.

¶11. (C) Jalaloglu believes that he has two advantages over other opposition candidates. First, he said the public will positively perceive the fact that he has not been a presidential candidate before. Second, he said that he had introduced the idea of the "constructive" opposition. Besides himself, Jalaloglu believed that Isa Gambar and Lala Shovket would be the strongest opposition candidates. After the election, if the GOAJ offered him a high-level position, Jalaloglu said he would take it.

RASUL GULIYEV'S ROLE?

¶12. (C) Open Society Party Acting Chair Akif Shahbazov said that the party's goal is for exiled party Chair Rasul Guliyev to return to Azerbaijan. He requested U.S. assistance in seeking the GOAJ's guarantee of a secure arrival, stating that Guliyev "has no enemies here" and does not want confrontation between citizens and the police. Shahbazov said that a competitive campaign would help the ruling party demonstrate President Aliyev's popularity, and that Guliyev perhaps could work within the GOAJ if he did not win the election. He stressed that Guliyev would not attempt to return without the GOAJ's permission, and said that the criminal case against Guliyev should be taken to court, but without Guliyev being detained during the pre-trial and trial periods.

¶13. (C) (NOTE: Rasul Guliyev's failed attempt to return to Azerbaijan was a key issue in the 2005 parliamentary elections. Dozens of Guliyev supporters were arrested, and some were beaten by police, in connection with his anticipated return. In March 2006, Guliyev and his supporters split from the Azerbaijan Democratic Party to form the Open Society Party (ref b); the two factions disagreed over the party's platform and Jalaloglu's decision to join the "constructive" opposition - code word in "radical" opposition circles for parties seen as having sold out to the government. END NOTE.)

ONE "POCKET" OPPOSITION MP POISED TO RUN

¶14. (C) "Pocket" opposition Hope Party Chair and Member of Parliament (MP) Igbal Agazade has publicly announced his intention to run for president. (NOTE: The traditional opposition uses the term "pocket" opposition to refer to

parties which present themselves as pro-opposition, but are believed to be in the "pocket" of the government.) Agazade said the Hope Party has been preparing for the election for the past two years, by creating regional cells and establishing cooperation with other organizations. He explained that rather than conducting a centrally-run campaign, the party's regional branches will be responsible for campaigning in their respective regions. Agazade said the party has been contacting potential voters via the Internet and SMS text-messages, and will soon launch a program through which supporters can donate funds to his campaign via SMS messages, with the smallest amount set at 0.20 AZN (approximately \$0.24). Agazade believes that the use of new technology will spark the population's interest in participating in the election. He will refrain from using the "rally tactic," he explained, because it would subject his supporters to police brutality. Agazade said that closer to the election, the party will conduct a door-to-door campaign.

OTHER POTENTIAL CANDIDATES

¶15. (C) Pseudo-independent Azerbaijan Democratic Reforms Party (ADRP) Chair and MP Asim Mollazade said he was considering running, but his decision would depend on finances. His party was examining their resources, he said, but he did not yet know if he could acquire the two or three million AZN he believed was necessary to launch a "serious" campaign. If ADRP does not have a candidate in the election, Mollazade said it would not support any coalition or any other party, but would find other ways of participating, like monitoring the election. "Pocket" opposition Civil Solidarity Party Chair Sabir Rustamkhanli said he was considering running, and noted that elections are the only means to change Azerbaijan's stagnant political life. He said his decision would depend on the outcome of the GOAJ's dialogue with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission on changes to the electoral code, and the opposition's decision regarding potential coalitions. If Rustamkhanli does not run, he said he would not encourage party members to support "unrealistic" candidates, noting "we tried to help each other in previous elections, but failed." The press has speculated that the leaders of three other "pocket" opposition parties also may run for president: Justice Party Chair and MP Ilyas Ismayilov, Great Creation Party Chair and MP Fazil Gazanfaroglu, and Whole Popular Front Party Chair and MP Gudrat Hasanguliyev.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) Azerbaijan's traditional opposition is continuing its long history of division and back-biting, leaving it increasingly disjointed and irrelevant. While the opposition has indeed faced serious restrictions in its ability to hold public meetings and conduct routine party activities, the major parties, with the exception of Musavat, have made little effort to develop the serious platforms or grassroots support needed to counter this pressure and win an election. Leaders such as Ali Kerimli and Lala Shovket choose instead to focus on the prospects of a strong international reaction to an "illegitimate" election, even as they admit such prospects are highly unlikely.

¶17. (C) While it is encouraging to see other candidates actively engaging with specific campaign plans, the Azadliq bloc's likely decision to boycott hints at a less volatile presidential campaign. Azadliq bloc's likely decision to boycott will quash any chances of the opposition uniting behind a single candidate and launching any kind of serious challenge to Aliyev. Over the long-term, boycotting the election will serve only to drive the Azadliq bloc into further irrelevancy, leaving the bloc seemingly destined to fulfill the GOAJ's desire to eradicate the "radical" opposition. The other opposition parties are acutely aware of the implications of an Azadliq boycott, and their leaders already are jockeying to fill the void that Azadliq's inactivity has created. Given the widely held assumption that Aliyev will coast to an easy victory in October, Namazov, Gambar, Jalaloglu, and Agazade seem to be running not for president, but for recognition as Azerbaijan's "leading" opposition figure.

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